



DAVID.

THE BOY THAT WAS TOO BEAUTIFUL.

(A Two-Part Story.)

BY MRS. LUCIA CHASE BELL.

NOBODY, I am sure, who is unacquainted with the circumstances I am about to relate, would ever guess that David could do wrong.

His teacher, Miss Roland, when she looked into his face on the first day of school, thought to herself, "What a dear, beautiful, honest, little face!"

And Miss Deane, who presided over the department just across the hall, said to David's teacher, when the scholars had all marched out for recess: "What little boy *is* that with such a cherub face?"

The high school girls used to look down at David as he came to school in the morning, and murmur: "Oh, do see that lovely little boy!"

Visitors, when they came to the school, never failed to remark in low, aside tones to Miss Roland: "That little boy, yonder, on the side aisle — why, his face is positively angelic!"

David's beauty was not at all owing to charms of dress. There was not the least hint of the Pattern Bazar in David's costume. It was always ample in outline — particularly with regard to trousers — and it was warm and serviceable and clean. If Mrs. Piatt, for instance, should dress David, I feel sure that he would wear his hair in glorious, glowing curls, rolling back from that richly-tinted cherub face. Instead of coarse blue gingham encircling that exquisitely rounded throat, there would be a daintily-falling, fluted collar, reminding one with the beautiful boyish face above it, of "John Milton in his Boyhood." Or sometimes, in jaunty plaid and plumes, he would resemble a little Scotch earl. And how dainty he would have looked in short trousers, and dapper little braided cut-away jackets!

Miss Roland often thought of those things in the first days of school, when probably she ought to have been considering weightier matters.

It was very astonishing to Miss Roland, I assure you, when she began to observe that around David's desk there was always more or less fun going on. Nothing uproarious. No, indeed. Merely an atmosphere of intense enjoyment pervading David and all his neighbors. A cheerfulness, in fact, not to be extracted from the "Pacific Coast Second Reader," nor the "Pacific Coast Spelling Book," nor any other educational implement of the Pacific Coast, unless it might possibly be the slate.

Well, if she took a gentle walk down that aisle, she did sometimes find on David's slate something that was not an "inscribed circle," nor an "erect cross with right angles," nor anything of that kind. On the other hand it was never anything very bad. And on the other side of his slate his spelling exercise was sure to be neatly written out, and his regular drawing lesson carefully preserved, and, quite likely, a very good outline map of Oregon "thrown

in extra," and all signed with an elaborate flourish, "David Comstock." He *always* had his reading lesson, and none could beat David in spelling, and in "numbers" David was quickest of all.

So, what was to be done?

She really couldn't accuse David of anything but that his neighbors took too great an interest in him. And how could *they* help that? He was so irresistibly tempting that *she* could hardly refrain from cuddling her hand against his soft neck and chin whenever she came near him. Besides, he bristled all over with pocket-knives, and flag-root, and cinnamon bark, and gum, and "tin monies," and marbles, and india rubber strings, and a hundred other things, but he was never doing anything with them except putting them away, that she could discover. He was "reaching in for his other slate pencil and it was fast to the fish-hooks, and he pulled and the rest all tumbled out." And David always spoke in such a delicious, slow, candid drawl, looking up at her with those clear, appealing, trustful eyes! In fact, that drawl of David's was irresistible. Miss Roland, of course, was morally certain that fish-hooks couldn't *always* be at the bottom of everything; but, somehow, she never felt that way till she stood, safe and stern, by her own desk. Then it was too late.

At last, in one of those pleasant little walks down the aisle, Miss Roland found something cut with a knife in the handsome shining top of David's new "native-wood" desk; cut in great, ugly, jagged letters that were doubtless meant to be very beautiful indeed.

"I LOVE MY TEACHER. DAVID COMSTOCK."

David always signed his name to everything. And what a charming sentiment this was, signed by "David Comstock!"

The scholars sat in breathless silence when Miss Roland stopped by David's desk that morning. And Miss Roland stood in breathless silence for at least one full minute, gazing upon that wicked, wicked work. David kept his eyes steadily this time on the "Pacific Coast Second Reader;" but she could see the rich pink deepening in those lovely dimples. His hair had just lately been shingled. How lovely the shining, shaved head looked — like a baby's! It was hard, that minute, to keep her caressing hand off. How clean his hands were; always clean. Not too soft and dimpled, but supple and smooth as a strong young cherub's.

Various wild and incoherent lines of action went whirling through Miss Roland's mind in that minute of awful silence. Suppose now, she should invite David to stand up by his desk and repeat that sentence solemnly, in a loud distinct tone: "I LOVE MY TEACHER. DAVID COMSTOCK."

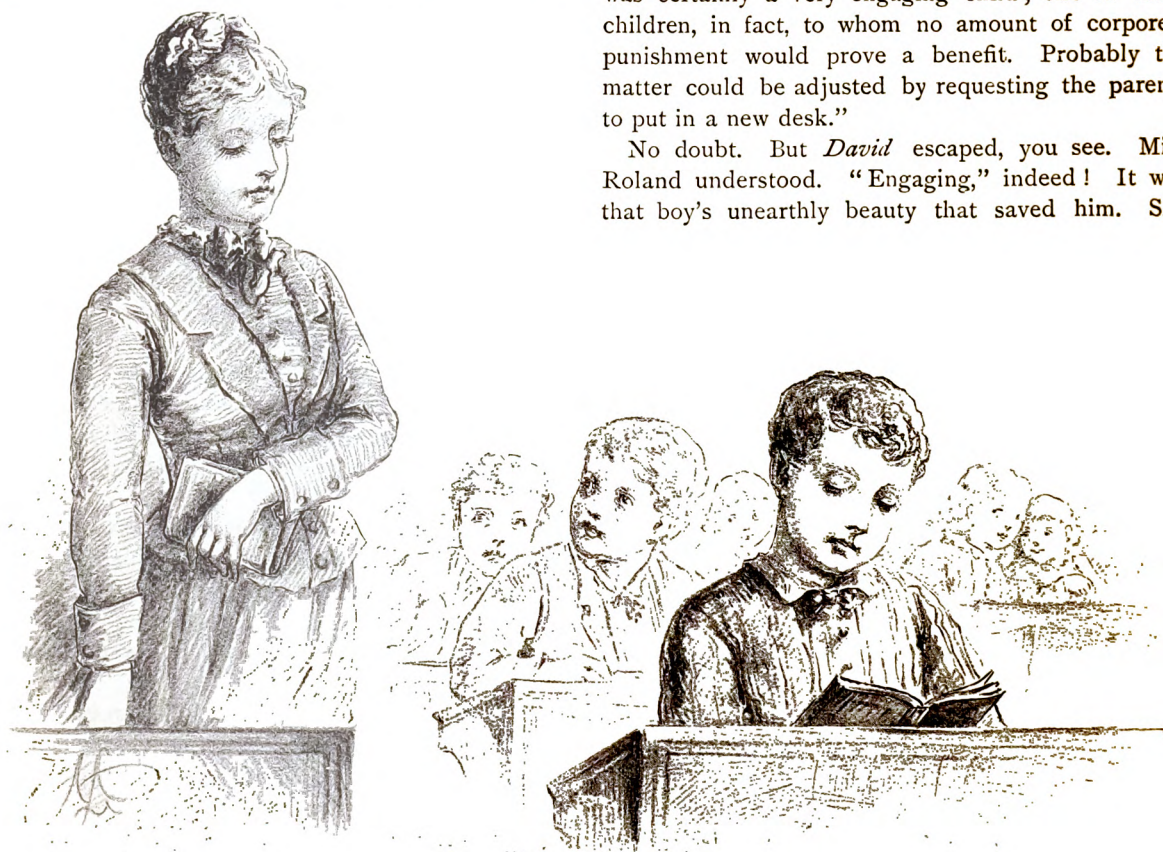
How those scholars would laugh! And how keenly David would feel that he was the most ridiculous of boys. But then, he *did* love his teacher. No doubt of it. There was a rude fern leaf

Miss Roland made a little speech about the solemn mockery of whittling, "I LOVE MY TEACHER. DAVID COMSTOCK," on a beautiful new school desk, and sent David with a note to the superintendent.

David was in his place as usual after recess, delightfully meek, and pervaded with a sort of tenderly conscious air; but, bless you! it was evident in a minute that not a hair of his head had been harmed.

The superintendent had a private interview with Miss Roland, in which he remarked that the "boy was certainly a very engaging child; one of those children, in fact, to whom no amount of corporeal punishment would prove a benefit. Probably the matter could be adjusted by requesting the parents to put in a new desk."

No doubt. But *David* escaped, you see. Miss Roland understood. "Engaging," indeed! It was that boy's unearthly beauty that saved him. She



A MINUTE OF AWFUL SILENCE.

scratched over the word "teacher," and a scalloped line cut underneath as an affectionate embellishment. If she made him ridiculous he would certainly hate her. Perhaps he would stay away from school. *Could* she whip David? Miss Roland considered it barbarous to whip at all. Would you whip one of the Sistine Cherubs? Absurd. Then the law put in its claim. The law said all sorts of painful things: "Report to superintendent—corporeal punishment—suspend—expel."

fairly shivered to think what matters were coming to. Even the superintendent under the spell! For *could* a boy with freckles, or a stubby nose, or a red, rough neck, or a mouth too much like his relations' instead of a mouth simply angelic have escaped being made a dreadful example? Miss Roland thought not.

Perhaps things would be made painful for David at home on account of that desk, but she had her doubts. And well she might; for there were other people who suffered on account of David, a kind of

suffering to which the desk episode at school was mere festivity. In fact, "the parents" did dutifully put in a beautiful new top to David's desk, and forgot the whole affair the same day, so small was this affliction compared to what they endured at home.

As I said, there were other people who found themselves in predicament with regard to David. I say *were*, because, although "these persons are all living," *things are changed*.

David's home was in a little, pale, pink farmhouse out on the borders of an Oregon river-bottom, nearly two miles from the large town where he attended school. Miles and miles away from David's home you could see ranges of mountains, foot-hills of the Sierras, far off, but seeming some days to rise right up from behind the river-bottom woods. They have bald sides toward the south and west, but on the other side, stretching away toward the lonely snow peaks, are oceans of forests, full of bears and cougars and deer. On the very crests of the foot-hills you can see, here and there at sunset, lonely sentinel firs standing up, tall and dark, apart from all others, keeping watch. And oh! all the year round, such wonderful shifting colors come and go over the naked mountain sides.

I don't suppose David ever thought much about the beauty away off there. But he knew his walk from home through the river-bottom to school was a jolly one, even when the "swift slough" went roaring wild, and the foot-log creaked in the green, foaming water.

Everything was sunshiny and comfortable at David's house, with the doors always standing wide open, Oregon fashion, and great oak knots glowing generously in the large fire-place where the fire had not been out for eight years they said.

Little fluffy chickens were always peeping around the house in the soft grass, and soft-eyed calf-bossies skipping about in the barn-lot. Apples—there was no end of apples, and from May to October the most delightful berries, not to speak of bushels of cherries. Roses bloomed all winter around David's house, so you may suppose that they were bewilderingly lovely in summer; real trees in fact, caressing the mossy eaves of the little pink house, while the mammoth fuschias dangled their fairy bells over the top of the parlor window.

Everybody at David's house from his father, John Comstock, and his aunt, Sarah Comstock, down to

the baby, Sarepta Ann Comstock, were just as rosy and happy as could be, *except his mother*. Her soft brown eyes were always kind and motherly when they looked at you, but she never smiled. Her face was a thin, kind face, and her hair was gray. And the cause of this pale, tired face was David—David the Beautiful, the Candid.

David had a habit of forgetting to come home at night; that is, at a good, respectable hour, when the other children came.

And there was the mill race for David to cross on his way home, and the tannery at the edge of the town, with its yawning vats. And the railroad, too, not to mention the swift slough or the mill dam, if he chose to come around that way, and then the mile of dark river-bottom woods. David's mother always read the weekly paper all through. She had nothing else to read. And it did seem to her as if some demon arranged those news columns every week on purpose to make her worry herself wild about David. It was terrible to sit down every week and read, in spite of yourself, the things that were always happening to boys!

There was the story of a little boy (just David's age) who climbed to the top of a lofty pine, and then fell to the bottom, to be picked up "a mass of crumbled bones." (Plenty of firs and pines in the river-bottom, so tall that it made one sick and dizzy just to *look* at the top.)

Then came the harrowing tale of two little Oregon boys starving to death in the woods, not eight miles from home. If David should come around by the mill dam now, and take the wrong road in the dark, and follow the stream up the McKenzie—why then, some day, perhaps they would find a little heap of white bones in the mountains, and David's dinner-pail, and word would be sent down to the valley, and that would be all they could ever know.

David's mother would chill with something that wasn't agree, as she sat in the quiet afternoon thinking of this. The other children always came home safe and straight at the right time, but not David. Nobody could tell when to look for David; because, although David *meant* to come, he always "forgot." And David always argued in his sweet, slow, trusting way that a boy couldn't *help* "forgetting." If a thing went out of his mind how could he help it from going, any more than he could keep things from coming in?

Then she read about a little boy shot with another

boy's toy pistol in Portland — not so very far away !

And there was another boy who fell backwards from a wagon and broke his neck.

Two little boys were drowned in a shallow.

And, last of all, there was the story of a whole troop of children poisoned by drinking the water of a familiar stream.

How could she know any evening, when David failed to come home, that nothing like this had happened to him? If she questioned Philemon, or Charlie, or little Martha, they never could remember anything singular about David's conduct. He always "started from school when they did." They "didn't notice David stopping anywhere." They "never thought to wait for David."

David's father always sat and serenely smoked his evening pipe on these occasions, merely remarking that David would "turn up all right." Aunt Sarah never worried in the least. This only made the suspense more exasperating to David's mother. She felt that neither *they* nor anybody could know that David would turn up all right *this* time. She walked the floor in feverish anxiety. She paced up and down the path. She went as far as the "swift slough" to meet David. She sent messengers to the neighbors. She dispatched members of the family in every conceivable direction to search for David. She had one severe spell of fever on account of waiting and watching for David out in the cool night dew after a hard day's work; and it was declared that David's mother, "Lizy," would go insane or "die in her prime," on account of David's conduct.

I am not sure but that, queerly enough, one of the most wearing features of the case was the fact that David always *did* turn up all right. To think that, after all this suffering at home, David should come sauntering carelessly up the path about nine o'clock, which is only dark in Oregon summer-time, drop his old straw hat on the floor, and remark with easy grace that he was "jest down in the bottom cleanin' out a bumble bees' nest, an' he answered every time

they hollered — didn't some of them hear him?"

Or, perhaps he had *been* there, right in the sitting-room, and put his dinner-pail with his shoes and stockings behind the door, and then slipped out *very* softly, and had been fishing for "chubs" in the run all this while. Hadn't been hungry. Got a piece of pie out of the pantry. S'posed Aunt Sarah saw him.

David had been bribed; and he had been threatened; and he had been lectured. Nothing seemed to make any impression.

At last a great cruel whip was hung in the kitchen, parallel with the kitchen towel, where David could see it every morning when he wiped his lovely face. David's father hung it there. He said he "wasn't going to have Lizy's life worried out of her with David's doings, and the whole family pestered to hunt for David every other evening. David had got to come to time." He couldn't see, though, why Lizy wasn't able to re-organize David's conduct herself.

David's teacher could if they had asked her. David was too beautiful. There was no doubt about it. No other boy ever had such a lovely, appealing face, nor such a delightful, honest drawl that went right to your heart.

Can you believe it? David forgot again. This time I think his mother suffered worse than ever before. There was not only the fear that something dreadful kept him from coming home, but the certainty that something dreadful would happen if he ever did get home. For David's father was very much in earnest. He was too much in earnest to be able to take his usual comfortable evening smoke. He walked up and down the floor almost as often as David's mother did. Once he went out as far as the barnyard gate to look. His lips were set, and there was an ominous severity settling upon his brows.

At last, when the gold had quite faded from the distant hilltops, David came pattering up to the house, swinging his dinner-pail in the familiar, sweetly-unconscious, provoking way.

(END OF PART I.)

